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ABSTRACT

A national language is useful as one means of creating social cohesion at the level of the whole country. It is also a symbol of national identity and of a nation's distinction from other countries. Probably no nation will ever be fully satisfied with a language that is a national language in the symbolic sense only, but the symbolic function of a national language has some importance. The most frequent single problem in installing a national language is not related to vocabulary expansion, spelling or grammmar standardization, the adequacy of the educational system, or the presence of an ensconced colonial language, but is often simply that there is no language that a sufficiently large majority of the citizens will accept as a symbol of national identity. (MSE)

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Ralph Fasold

short title: as above

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What National Languages are Good For

Ralph Fasold

Some time ago, Joshua Fishman (1968) introduced several technical terms into the study of the sociology of language. One of these terms, nationality, refers to an sociocultural group of a particular type. That is, a nationality has all the properties of an ethnic group, but in addition has developed beyond primarily local self-concepts and concerns, and may also have a larger and more complex level of sociocultural integration than ethnic groups do. It is not necessary, in Fishman's definition, for there to be some polity corresponding to a nationality; many nationalities live within the borders of states governed by other nationalities. If, in fact, a nationality "largely or increasingly" controls an independent political unit, Fishman would call it a nation. By this definition, not every country you find on a map of the world is a nation. Some countries, Switzerland is perhaps an example, are not sufficiently under the control of a single nationality to qualify as a nation in this technical sense. Nationalism, in Fishman's scheme, is the organization of the beliefs, values and behaviors of a nationality with regard to its own self-awareness. Since nationalities are sociocultural groups, quite independently of whether or not they are in control of a political-territorial entity, nationalism has to do with

group pride and awareness, rather than with governing a political unit.

Assuming that we are talking about a nation in Fishman's sense, a country substantially under the political control of a single nationality, then governing is also an issue. Legislative bodies have to formulate and record laws in some language or languages, children need to be educated through the medium of one or more languages, military and police organizations must function in one or another language. These tasks have considerable urgency. They must be carried out on a regular basis or the country will not function, and they are quite different from the concerns of nationalism. Where the political and territorial integrity of a country are the most important issues, Fishman uses the term nationism. A language which is used for nationalist purposes, we can call a national language. A language used for nationist purposes can be called an official language. To overstate the case a bit, a national language can be compared to the national flag. A country's flag functions almost entirely as a symbol. An official language is more like the trackage and rolling stock of a national railroad. It's purpose is more pragmatic than symbolic.

There is a third function a language might serve, although Fishman does not mention it, perhaps because it is so obvious. We might call it the communicative function. The communicative

function overlaps with the official function, in that it refers to communication among the people in a country, but it also includes the unofficial, unexceptional social interactions of everyday life -- chatting over the back fence, trading at the market, yelling at the children and so on. What I hope to isolate by invoking the communicative function, is ordinary talking divorced from any symbolic or identity value a language variety might also have. I realize this is an abstraction, and, like all abstractions, it artificially simplifies the reality that inspires it.

Another notion that I will invoke in this discussion is what I call naturalism. Naturalism simply means that we try to determine what is actually happening, regardless of whether what is going on has been officially endorsed by law or constitution. From the naturalist point of view, Guarani has been the actual national language of Paraguay in spite of the fact that it was declared to be a co-national language with Spanish only in 1967. On the other hand, if we consider India as a whole and view the national language issue from the naturalist perspective, we would have to say that Hindi has not yet become the national language, although it was so declared at independence. Whether or how soon a given language will become a national, official or communicative language in the naturalist sense depends heavily on how well suited it is to fulfilling that particular set of functions. The case of former colonies shows the contrast between the require-

ments of a national language and those of an official language. The language of the former imperial country is usually the best qualified as an official language, at least in the beginning. The governing institutions have most likely been set up in the colonial language and nationist tasks are carried out with the least disruption if the use of that language is continued. On the other hand, the former colonial language is an absolutely atrocious choice as a national language. Nothing could be a worse symbol of a new nation's self-awareness than the language of a country from which it had just achieved independence. Of course, if the national language of the newly-independent nationality is the language of the former "mother country", as in the case of English, French, Portuguese and Spanish in various parts of the new world, the colonial language will serve quite well as both national and official language.

In fact, it is popularly and universally considered desirable for the same language to serve all three functions. This general inclination to favor a single language for all functions of a nation does have some arguments in its favor. I think it is important conceptually to separate nationalism and national languages from nationism and official languages, and both from communicative languages. However, I do not want to leave the impression that nations typically have one language it uses to implement governing tasks with no more emotion or loyalty attached to it than you might have for a hammer; another that in-

spires loyalty and devotion, but has no communicative use at all, and another or several others that people simply use for chatting with each other. As Fishman (1984) has recently pointed out, where language is concerned, nationism and nationalism are intertwined. The development of national languages is part of the development of a nation as a whole. Pre-developed states are often characterized, among other things by structural compartmentalization (Fishman 1984:42). Compartmentalization tends to be mutually reinforcive by occupation, ethnicity and religion. To cite Fishman's example: "Poles = landholders = Catholics; Ukrainians = peasants = Eastern Orthodox; Jews = petty merchants = Jewish". Language is one more factor involved in compartmentalization, with each group's verbal repertoire contributing to within-group cohesion and to separation from other groups. To the extent that an industrialized society demands the breakdown of this sort of compartmentalization and the establishment of social cohesion at a more inclusive level, the development of a national language (in the naturalist sense) is essential. Even in a nation such as Tanzania, which has declined to attempt to build an industrial society, the development of a national language seems to have been essential to national goals. Tanzania, in fact, is one of the brightest success stories with respect to national language development in a newly independent state.

The closest approximation of a pure national language might be Irish Gaelic (or simply Irish) in Ireland, as Rubin (1984:8) has

noticed. By the time the Republic of Ireland achieved independence earlier in this century, Irish had receded before English to the point that it was the native language of only a tiny minority. Even as a second language, it was used by a rather small minority of the population. After independence, the new Irish constitution designated Irish as the national language and as the first official language (English was the second). The nation set about a restoration of the Irish language that was designed to increase the use of Irish for official functions, and also to make it the language of ordinary communication for Irish citizens.

Without going into the details, and with the realization that there are those in Ireland and elsewhere who disagree, it seems to me that the Irish government did about all you can expect a government to do to in support of a national language. The primary education system, for example, was brought into the enterprise to such an extent that one Irish observer (O Huallachain 1962:80) sees the system as having 'a double purpose: to give the instruction usually imparted to children up to the age fourteen and to teach Irish'. Yet, the restoration effort, by and large, has either stood still or been slowly pushed backward. The native Irish-speaking population, only about 3% of the total population at independence, is now less than 1%, only a few tens of thousands of people. In a survey taken in the late 1960s (O Huallachain 1970), only 2% said they used the language at home

'all or much of the time' (this would include second-language users). Only slightly over half of those who claimed to use the language 'at least occasionally' said that it was of any practical use to them (most of the uses they cited were directly related to the restoration effort, such as helping children with homework). There has been a steady decline in the use of Irish in education above the primary level, and the requirement that an Irish competency test be passed to secure a civil service position -- never more than a formality -- was abandoned in 1974.

In spite of the bleak results compared to the stated goals of the restoration effort, I would agree with Rubin that Irish serves as the national language of Ireland, relating the term 'national language' to Fishman's concept of nationalism. In a fairly recent large-scale study of reported attitudes and language use (Brudner and White 1979), it was found that attitudes about Irish were generally positive, but bore little relationship to reported use of Irish. But there <u>was</u> a close association between attitudes towards Irish as an ethnic symbol, Irish nationality and Irish speakers. In a small-sample survey conducted by Lynn Lynch in 1983 among Irish immigrants to the USA, 22 of 30 respondents objected to the proposition that Irish is a dead language, and 16 of 29 respondents agreed that 'Ireland would not really be Ireland without Irish-speaking people'. Eighteen of 21 said they would like to learn more Irish. In Ireland, solid support for the maintenance of Irish in the

primary schools seems to be continuing and there has been something of a renaissance in Irish literature, film, theater and music. There are active organizations, such as the Gáelic League, which pressure the government to increase its efforts on behalf of Irish and who encourage the restoration of the language by private means. In spite of its failure as an official or communicative language, Irish seems to be serving the nation as a national language rather well.

What is a national language good for? It's good as one means of creating social cohesion at the level of the whole country; an apparent near-requisite for national development. But at the same time a national language is a symbol of national identity and of a nation's distinction from other countries. Probably no nation, not even Ireland, will ever be fully satisfied with a language that is a national language in a symbolic sense only. But the symbolic sense should never be overlooked. I would dare to suggest that the most frequent single problem in installing a national language has nothing to do with vocabulary expansion, spelling or grammar standardization, the adequacy of the educational system or the presence of an ensconced colonial language. The biggest problem is that there often simple is no language that a sufficiently large majority of the citizens will accept as a symbol of national identity.

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